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ABSTRACT

Mastery Learning, a learning strategy which denies the inevitability of the normal grading curve, holds promise in skill-building courses. For a composition course using this strategy, course objectives must first be established and stated behaviorally, after which the course may be broken into learning units, each lasting perhaps two weeks. At the end of a two-week instruction period, students take a formative or diagnostic test--one of the defining features of Mastery Learning. Students not passing the test are directed to another defining feature, corrective learning experiences. Unit subjects may be divided into such units as manuscript matters, content, and the mechanics of writing. This strategy recognizes the potential of students as being unlimited and introduces system, measurement, and self-evaluation into education. (JM)

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MASTERY LEARNING AT OLIVE-HARVEY COLLEGE

Several years ago our colleague Emmett Jones was appointed Director of Research and Evaluation at Olive-Harvey. In preparation for that position he enrolled in a course in Educational Measurement taught by Benjamin Bloom, the author of the Taxonomy of Educational Objectives which has become a standard resource for students of curriculum and educational measurement. Bloom had designed his course in educational measurement along lines suggested by his then current interest--a learning strategy he called Mastery Learning. Emmett's success as a student in the course was responsible for a shift in interest to exploring the potential of Mastery Learning for improving achievement in his own biology classes at Olive-Harvey. Thus began an extensive experimentation with Mastery Learning at our college, continuing over three years, involving seven or eight disciplines and perhaps fifteen teachers.

Though we have never formulated an overall research design, we have accumulated a body of figures. Some results are quite impressive--those in biology, for instance. Others are less impressive, and perhaps those in composition are among the latter. Nevertheless, we conclude generally that Mastery Learning seems to hold promise as an instructional strategy in skill building courses as well as others and its efficacy seems to increase from semester to semester as the strategy is refined. What I would like to do with the remainder of my time is to explain what we mean by Mastery Learning and to discuss some of the objectives which can be raised against this learning strategy, particularly as it is employed in the humanistic disciplines. My colleague Bill McGannon will provide a closer picture of the operation of Mastery Learning in his composition classes.

Mastery Learning denies the inevitability of the normal curve as a reflection of achievement. Or, to put it another way--if some people can get A's, all people can get A's; and without a great deal of hassle and self-sacrifice. Bloom and others have pointed out when we accept the curve as an inevitable reflection of the range of classroom achievement, such an acceptance strongly structures our expectations and our behavior as teachers. In

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fact we begin to see our principal instructional task as to string out students along the curve, meeting our production quotas of A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's. Ivan Illich suggests that this is, alas, the total function of the educational system--to sort people out. So, in order to do what they have to do, teachers invent trick questions to separate the A's from the B's, count off for late work, or invent other devices to ensure that some fail.

Rather than our devising strategies which ensure failure, Mastery Learning suggests that a strategy be divised to ensure success. Such a strategy cannot ignore individual variations among learners. Admittedly, some are quicker; some more interested; some more sensitive; some more motivated. Mastery Learning suggests, however, that though these individual differences are undeniable--may be, in fact, "what makes the world go round"--they need not account for great variation in classroom achievement of learners, or, at least, they need not preclude very substantial achievement for most or all students. In other words, Mastery Learning suggests--not the student's I.Q., not his relationship with his parents, not his social class nor his race nor his interests nor the number of books in his home, not his job at the A and P--none of these need determine whether he learns to write well . . . none of these. What determines whether he will learn to write is what Professor Schechtman does to him in English 101 J. If, indeed, learning is an inevitable consequence of all that is beyond Professor Schechtman's control . . . who the hell needs Professor Schechtman?

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How, then, by manipulating contigencies within the teacher's control, can all students be brought to a high level of achievement?

We begin with objectives, behaviorally stated, if possible, and clear to the instructor and to the student. After considering broad objectives for the course as a whole, our task is to break the course into discrete learning units. In some disciplines these units are sequential; in others, probably composition, what the units are and the order in which they are learned may be rather arbitrary. Nevertheless, for each learning unit there are explicit objectives. In a unit on structuring a composition, for instance, these might be among the objectives:

A. A student shall recognize fundamental differences between the spontaniety of spoken discourse and the structure of written discourse.

B. The student shall recognize that structuring a composition requires decisions regarding order, proportion and relevance.

C. The student shall recognize transitional devices, words and phrases, and their importance as a tool for achieving coherence within a paper.

D. The student shall employ transitional words or phrases where appropriate between paragraphs.

Nothing earthshaking about these.

A unit might cover two weeks of instruction. Following the instruction comes what might be called the "defining feature" of Mastery Learning--a formative or diagnostic test. This brief test allows the student to determine whether he has mastered the objectives of the unit. It might, for instance, require that the student read a brief selection and pick out three elements which flaw its structure. Or it might require that the student rearrange elements in an outline or create an outline--a performance test. For administrative efficiency it should be brief and easily graded and should be directed precisely to the stated objectives of the unit. If the student passes the formative test, fine. If he does not, and here is another "defining feature" of Mastery Learning, the student is direct specifically to certain "corrective learning experiences." These might include tutoring by his classmates or peers, a conference with the instructor, tapes or other audio-tutorial devices, or simply a reading of relevant portions of the text. Then, at the next class meeting, there is a readministration of the formative test, and those who need more help are invited to talk to the instructor.

The student's performance on the formative test does not affect the teacher's grade evaluation. His final grade in a content course such as biology might depend upon his performance on one or two summative or comprehensive examinations. In my composition course the grade depends upon the student's theme grades--particularly the later ones. But in a skills course such as composition the same underlying principles operate as in the biology or the history course. The first unit of my course in concerned with trivial manuscript matters--paper size, endorsement procedures, legible script written in ink. Papers written in conjunction with this unit of instruction are expected to show conformity with these

manuscript standards, and those that do receive "A", as well they should. Hasn't the student learned everything that has been taught at that point in the course?

The subject of our next unit is content. Here other considerations become important. The social or personal value of what the student has to say. His ability to embody the abstract in the concrete personal experience. And so forth. And now his papers are evaluated both in terms of their conformity to manuscript standards and in terms of his ability to select out an aspect of experience which will let him say something important and something he wants to say. By theme six, our evaluation of the student's paper may have become global or total, but our correctional notation is still geared to the preceding units which he has learned.

What about mechanics--grammar, punctuation, idiom? These are corrected on the student's paper in green ink the first time round. The student hands in all preceding papers with each new one. If the same type of mechanical error is repeated, the instructor marks it in red and the error becomes a factor in the total evaluation of his theme.

Such a method of evaluation plays fair with the student. It purports to and succeeds in grading the student on what he is supposed to have learned from the course, not on his general language sophistication, his speech environment or educational history or whatever.

I present this brief outline of Mastery stragegy not without some embarrassment, because I can sense the reaction of sophisticated audiences--particularly teachers in the humanities--and the kinds of silent or articulated objection which can be anticipated. Mechanistic, some say. Limiting, other respond. So What? others may ask.

And I have read the NCTE discussion booklets on Accountability, on Writing Behavioral Objectives for English, and on the systems approach. Although accountability, systems analysis and even behavioral objectives are not inherent in the Mastery approach I have outlined, they are certainly fellow travellers. And I think it accurate to term the Council's position on these (official or unofficial) as watchful and suspicious.

Regarding behavioral objectives, James Moffet points out "the inadequacy of such formulation to the goals of English." If your educational philosphy goes like this: "I don't know really what kinds of learning experiences will give my students what I want them to have, now or in ten years. So I do my best and hope that things come out all right, without any way of testing what is really taking place"--if that is your position (and it may be a terable one), Mastery is not for you. But if you employ some other touchstone for evaluation than behavioral objectives--if, for instance, you give A's to students whose writing excites you--then try the Mastery approach and you may find yourself in a constant state of excitation.

Some critics say that Mastery Learning is limiting--all students must be reduced to a single level of mediocrity, and setting behavioral goals brings this about. I don't see the logic of this position. Every time that a student sits down with a pen and a blank piece of paper his potential is unlimited. I don't deter inspired students. In English, 100 is not the highest grade One trillion even is not the highest grade.

But many teachers say, "What's so new about this?" Joseph Foley has pointed out that by their nature composition courses have a Mastery principle built in. He writes, "Few components of curriculum offer so clear an illustration of formative evaluation as a set of student writings submitted during a school term. Even the least structured sequence of composition offers the essential feedback loop, and the mere return of work done has instructional and evaluative significance."

"So what's new?" says the critic. "You decide what you want to teach, teach it, test the kids, and if they don't learn it, you help them till they do. And you grade them at the end on whether or not they have learned it. I do that anyway; perhaps in a less formal way."

If you do that anyway, congratulations! You're a Mastery teacher. As to what's new about it, that's a complicated quesiton. Perhaps nothing.

The Mastery strategy presents advantages. It introduces system and measurement and self-evaluation into this particular service business we call education. We need these, particularly self-evaluation. God knows, nobody really evaluates us, or if they do, they proceed from the wrong motives and arrive at the wrong conclusions, after beginning with

questionable standards. But teachers really have no bosses. Even the self employed businessman has a boss--the inexorable force of the competitive system which destroys him if he's no good. Now teachers can have a boss. By enunciating clearly what they expect to do and by recognizing that the achievement of it lies within their power, they can recognize shortcoming and the need for improvement.

We must abandon the "if onlys." If only the students were better. If only they read the chapter and did the work. If only the administration would or would not do this or that, or the parents cared, or the secondary schools did their jobs. Isn't it pretty clear by now that in our lifetime the "if onlys" are nevers? We must recognize finally that we hold the key to significant change in student behavior right in our own classrooms. 150 minutes a week. Such power imposes a challenge. We must accept that challenge and rise to it.